

# GENESIS—WEEK 37

## JACOB FINISHES STRONG



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1769) on display at Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.*

Jacob is dying. He hands out his final blessings to his descendants.

But he doesn't go easy on all of them.

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Thank you.

Genesis 48:1–49:21 — Jacob Finishes Strong  
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1 Genesis 48:1–12 (ESV)

*After this, Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. And it was told to Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’ And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”*

*When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, “Who are these?” Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” And he said, “Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.” Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.” Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.*

Israel declares Joseph’s two sons to be his own sons. Can he do that?

Sure he can. This is the equivalent of a will. He’s giving them a great inheritance—full status as sons of Israel. Ephraim and Manasseh will be tribes just like the tribe of Judah or the tribe of Reuben. They will be referred to as half-tribes, but that’s just a reference; their inheritance in the Promised Land will be full.

And Jacob blesses them before he gets around to blessing his other sons. That’s huge. Remember, Jacob stole Isaac’s blessing from Esau. He knows a thing or two about blessings.

After seventeen years in Egypt, Jacob has reached the end of his road. He’s now settling his estate.

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One of the Church’s main jobs is to minister to dying and grieving people. No one lives forever, and when that terrible truth cannot be put off any longer, it brings unique pain.

Thus, this can be a unique challenge for the body. People are rightfully reticent when dealing with death. There are so many ways to say or do something wrong, and it’s hard to know what is and isn’t helpful.

It helps to be trained well. The best way to know what to say and what not to say it to be formally taught. One training program I can unreservedly recommend is Stephen Ministries. Their training is for all emotional struggles, not just grief and dying.

<https://www.stephenministries.org>

2 Genesis 48:13–22 (ESV)

*And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). And he blessed Joseph and said,*

*“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”*

*When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.” So he blessed them that day, saying,*

*“By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, ‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’”*

*Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.”*

This passage makes it seem like Jacob’s decision to bless Ephraim as the first born is arbitrary.

But Jacob has been “grandpa” to Ephraim and Manasseh for seventeen years. He knows them well and this is an informed choice. The tradition of favoring the firstborn seems to be violated in the Bible as much as it’s followed. There’s a lesson in there somewhere.

But today’s lesson comes from what happens later. While Ephraim will do better than Manasseh, Judah will ultimately be the premiere tribe. Jacob’s blessing is valuable but not *that* valuable.

The Bible never says that these blessings carry the force of prophecy.

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Just as Jacob’s blessing will only be as effectual as God chooses to make it, so our prayers are only as effectual as God chooses to make them.

But what an incredible honor it is to be able to ask! Praise God for wanting to have anything to do with us. We certainly don’t deserve it, yet He displays the riches of His glory through grace.

3 Genesis 49:1–7 (ESV)

*Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.*

*“Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.*

*“Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!*

*“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.”*

Jacob doesn't call this a blessing, though it's reminiscent of blessings Abraham and Isaac gave.

But this time it's not so simple. Abraham and Isaac weren't faced with dividing the covenantal promise among many sons. One son was the heir of the covenant and one son wasn't. Now Israel is doling the whole thing out.

It'd be a stretch to call this a blessing since these three sons get chewed out. So Jacob describes this literally. It's *what shall happen to you in days to come*.

Reuben is lucky to not get completely disinherited, given what he did with Bilhah. He loses the preeminence due to the firstborn, but he's still in the family.

Simeon and Levi are punished for massacring the men of Shechem. Jacob isn't buying the excuse they gave him in Genesis 34:31. It shouldn't satisfy us either; Simeon and Levi's double dealing with men who were mostly innocent bystanders was reprehensible.

It's good to see Jacob follow through on this.

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How awesome it is to think that God's punishment of Levi is to make his descendants priests. We just saw how Pharaoh's undeserving priests got favored in the distribution of food. This is the typical way of the world, but God does the exact opposite with His priests.

This fits with how following Christ is difficult by design. The priesthood of all believers means the suffering of all believers. That's the way it should be.

Americans almost never suffer for their faith, but there ought to be something more to this than just singing and studying and having fun.

Sure, we do a lot of charity, but is that enough?

4 Genesis 49:8–12 (ESV)

*“Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.”*

For Judah, Jacob's “forecast” is a blessing. It's wondrously prophetic and messianic.

Judah's name is the Hebrew word for “praise.” His brothers will praise him and bow down to him. He will be a conqueror in the spirit of a lion.

Judah will rule *until tribute comes to him*. The Hebrew here is uncertain, and scholars don't agree on what this means. The word “peoples” at the end of verse 10 is definitely plural and points to rule beyond Israel.

Yet, except for Christ's lordship over all, Israel never rules over other peoples. In fact, the rule of the house of David is not long by historical standards. Thus, it's hard to make sense of this except as a messianic prophesy.

The ending has hints of Palm Sunday and the last supper, but never connects to either precisely. It does connect to an abundance of grapevines though—and excessive or wasteful use.

Since Judah ends up settling in a vine-rich portion of the land, this may just be referring to that—along with the consequences of excess consumption.

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It's amusing to think about how the failings of David and his descendants can be fully explained by just fallen human nature plus plenty of grapes. Wine lubricates the gears of sin.

But that explanation is more general than just wine. Is there any blessing of modern life that doesn't make some sin more accessible or easier to conceal? The menu of ways we can sin has exploded. Everything is more potent—drinks, weapons, visual stimulation, you name it.

The internet, which is indispensable for writing and distributing these devotionals, is a great sin enabler. It's a powerful tool for accomplishing almost anything, good or bad.

The result is an epidemic of brokenness. Lives, relationships, marriages, and careers lie in tatters all around.

That's why ministries like Alcoholics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery, and Pirate Monks are so important.

They confront the issues that most folks avoid.

5 Genesis 49:13–21 (ESV)

*“Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.*

*“Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds. He saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant, so he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant at forced labor.*

*“Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward. I wait for your salvation, O LORD.*

*“Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels.*

*“Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies.*

*“Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.”*

This portion of Jacob's forecast has major accuracy problems. That gives some commentators fits; they expect these predictions to be without error.

But why hold Jacob to an inerrancy standard? The Bible is inerrant, not Jacob. The scriptures faithfully and accurately record what Jacob said—mistakes and all.

Jacob mentions Zebulun before Issachar, even though Issachar is older (Gen 30:17–20). That isn't even an error; Jacob didn't say he would list his sons by birth order. Besides, give the guy a break—he's on his deathbed at 147 years of age. People half that age expect to be forgiven worse senior moments.

Also, Zebulun's territory will not touch the Mediterranean Sea. That part of Jacob's forecast is definitely a blown call.

[http://www.zionism-israel.com/maps/Canaan\\_after\\_conquest.htm](http://www.zionism-israel.com/maps/Canaan_after_conquest.htm)

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We tend to expect anyone or anything connected to the Bible to be perfect. Thus, we tend to think of our pastors as perfect people. That sets an impossible standard, which makes their job oppressive, despite its incredible joys.

But there's an even bigger error—thinking that they don't need our prayers. That's not just wrong; it's dangerous. It's the exact opposite of the truth. Pastors need our prayers more than anyone. They're in the enemy's crosshairs. If you want to defeat an army, take out the leader.

Consider committing to praying for your pastors regularly—and not just at the obvious times, such as just before worship on Sunday.

Pastors are under attack 24/7.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What have you seen done notably well or notably badly with someone who's dying?
2. What is your favorite kind of prayer (or favorite prayer format)?
3. Who suffers for their faith nowadays? Try to think of a local case.
4. What brokenness issues are underserved by the church?
5. Do you treat your pastors like normal people?